

NSC BRIEFING

7 MARCH 1956

MIDDLE EAST SITUATION

- I. Flare-up of violence along Israeli border (4 to 7 March)
illustrates tenseness now prevailing between Arab states
and Israel.
- A. On 4 March, an apparent Israeli reconnaissance operation
on eastern shore of Lake Tiberias was blocked by Syrians,
who seized stranded Israeli boat, killed three and captured
one of crew.
1. Israeli foreign office has warned of "counter-action"
if captive not returned.
- On 5 March, Syrian ground-fire crippled Israeli light
plane (also probably on reconnaissance mission) near
northern border.
1. Israelis claim plane was fired on while over its
own territory.
- C. On 5 March, patrol clash took place along Israeli-
Egyptian frontier.
- D. On 7 March, Egyptian and Israeli positions in Gaza strip
hand exchange of fire.
- E. Same day, Israel protested to UN Security Council over
Syria's "wanton acts of aggression".
- II. Cause of present extreme tension is combination of Arab troop
concentrations near Israeli frontiers and simultaneous Israeli
force build-up (see map). Three most important are:
- A. Egypt--now has 42,500 men (over half of total army and

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1. Units in Sinai include tanks (with possibly 85 Soviet T-34 medium tanks in reserve).

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- [REDACTED]
- B. Jordan--its 22,000-man Arab Legion remains normally disposed at present (two brigades across river in West Jordan, two east of river), and its National Guard (21,600 men) is generally deployed along the 400-mile frontier with Israel.
 - C. Syria--now has practically all their forces (total: 39,200) on front aimed at Banat Yacov, where they believe Israelis will divert water from Jordan River.
 - D. As for other three, main elements of small (17,000) Saudi army remain in two concentrations: in and near the capital (Riyad) and in the Hejaz. Saudis would find it difficult to bring forces to bear on Israel.
 - E. Although Lebanon has moved some units of its 6,600 force into frontier positions, whole-hearted action by Lebanon is doubtful.
 - F. Although Iraq (53,000 men) has felt impelled to give public and private assurances of aid to other Arabs should a Palestine war develop, a combination of British influences, Baghdad pact considerations, and Iraq's 200-mile removal from Israel, would probably reduce the effectiveness of its participation.
 - G. Israel also continuing gradual mobilization.
 1. Now estimated they have between 85,000 and 100,000 men on active duty, in three major groups.
- III. Despite these ominous developments, there is still no evidence that either Arabs or Israelis have taken decision to initiate full-scale war.

- A. The great and immediate danger remains, however, that further Arab pin-pricks, followed by Israeli "retaliation", could set off war.

- B. At moment, this danger most acute on Syrian frontier.
- C. Nearly equal danger is that Israelis might be goaded-- both by internal and external considerations--into "preventive war".

IV. New factor in present Arab boldness is their belief that USSR stands ready to support them, both diplomatically and with continuing sales of arms.

- A. This belief encouraged by Moscow statements (most recent: 13 Feb) which denounce as "imperialism" both Western attempts to bring about palestine settlement and possible Western plans to intervene in event of fighting.
- B. Arab belief also encouraged by actual Soviet Bloc arms deliveries to date to Egypt and Syria, as well as by conclusion of additional contacts for arms.

V. First major phase of Bloc arms deliveries to Egypt now appears at end.

- A. Totals: probably 70-80 MIG-15's, 30-45 IL-28 jet light bombers, 100-150 T-34 (medium) tanks, 20-40 JS-3 (heavy) tanks, 11 torpedo boats.
- B. These are the major items--much other materiel, including artillery and vehicles, also presumably delivered.
- C. Bloc also starting delivery of arms to Syria, under contracts which may amount to as much as \$22 million (see background).

VI. Rise in Soviet influence among Arabs being matched by decline in position of UK in area. In UK-created Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, King Hussein's dismissal of Gen. Glubb (and destruction of British influence over Arab Legion) is latest symptom this continuing decline.

- A. London lost ground in December when it tried unsuccessfully to get Jordan to join Baghdad Pact [REDACTED]

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- B. Britain now likely to come under even greater pressure from Iraq--where principal UK oil interests lie--as Iraqis ask reward for their support of Baghdad Pact, opposition to Egypt.

- C. Potential UK military leverage from bases in area also declining (see background).

1. Evacuation of Suez base now far advanced.
2. Usefulness of Cyprus staging-base likely to decline further, with increasing political strife following collapse of latest Cyprus negotiations.
3. British garrison in Libya (at Idris) to be increased to one armored division, but Foreign Office anticipates increasing political problems there.
4. British air-base rights in Jordan and Iraq of little use in influencing local political developments.

VII. British consider retention of UK Middle East position absolutely essential--mainly because of oil.

- A. They maintain ME oil is vital to UK home economy.
- B. Most of UK's own annual consumption (28 million tons, worth some \$500 million) comes from ME fields.
1. UK expects domestic requirement to treble within next 20 years.

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2. Although they think atomic energy may make up some 40% (or more) of this requirement by end of 20 years, remainder must still come from oil.
- C. Aside from own consumption, British petroleum investment in area is big business (valued at equivalent \$1.68 billion) and important earner of foreign currency.
- D. Western Europe, as a whole, also similarly dependent on Middle East oil--75% of 1954's consumption.
- E. No official US estimate on this question, but British view regarded as substantially correct--with qualification that oil discoveries else where--e.g., in Mediterranean basin--could ease situation.

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